



# FUNERAL ALTERNATIVES

## WHEN GATHERINGS ARE NOT POSSIBLE



**T**raditional funerals meet many of our needs at the time we're saying good bye to the one we love. These traditions honor the person who died, while at the same time supporting those of us who have experienced the loss.

Funeral traditions and rituals can provide opportunities to:

- Say goodbye to the one who has died.
- Celebrate the life of our loved one and publically honor and remember them.
- Gain support from extended family and friends, from their words of encouragement, to their physical presence, from their sharing of stories, to their offering of gifts.
- Set aside some time where we can stop our normal lives for a while to focus on the one who died, and ourselves and our needs at this time.

### ALTERNATIVE ACTIVITIES AND RITUALS FOR FAMILIES

Because large public gatherings are not possible at this time, traditional funerals can't be held as they normally have been.

Even so, people's social and emotional needs remain. We have suggestions here for some alternative ways that families can say goodbye to their loved ones and continue to meet some of these needs.

We have developed these activities with children and families in mind. Try to include your children in both the planning and the performing of the activities and rituals. Remember, though, that kids like to be asked to take part in things but not forced. Even so, they might surprise you with some great ideas, so see if they want to participate.

We know that it's hard to plan funerals even under normal circumstances. That's why we have traditions and rituals – they help to guide us through the important moments in life, sometimes even helping us put one foot in front of the other when that's about all we can do. Now, with the normal supports of our traditions taken away, it's gotten a whole lot harder to make funeral plans.



Keep in mind, the suggestions we have are only suggestions. No matter what, this is a difficult time. Grieving takes a lot of energy. So don't expect to be able to do the same amount that you typically can do.

Use these activities as a guide to give you ways of thinking about honoring and remembering your person. If it turns out that you can do none of these activities, that's OK too. Be patient with yourself, allow yourself to do less, and lean on the people around you. Taking time out for yourself is also what funerals are for.

## SAYING GOODBYE

- In some areas, it is still possible to hold a funeral service with a limited number of participants at the funeral home. If this works in your case, you can ask the funeral director if they (or you) can live stream the service.
  - Hold a memorial service in your home for your loved one with your immediate family. You can choose to livestream this service to include relatives and friends that are not able to join you in person at this time, or you can make it more interactive by including people through Zoom or Skype or another platform. As part of this service, you can:
    - Tell stories about the person
    - Share memories about them
    - Share readings, songs, prayers and other things that are important to the family
    - Hold a candle lighting ceremony in honor of your person. This can be in your home, in your neighborhood, or at the gravesite.
- While there are restrictions on who can witness the actual burial at most cemeteries at this time, it may be possible to hold a small gathering (adhering to social distancing) at the gravesite after the burial.

## HONORING & REMEMBERING THE PERSON WHO DIED

- Plant a tree or plant flowers in your loved

one's memory.

- Collect some rocks and create memorial stones by painting them or writing messages on them in memory of your person.
- Donate to a charity in honor of your loved one.
- Create a collage, a slide show or a short movie focused on your person and their life.
- Create a family portrait using photos or drawings (especially with young children), and talk about the person who died.
- Create a memory box with things that generate memories of your loved one. As time goes on, anytime you have a memory of your loved one, you want to talk to them, or have a message for them, write it down and put it in the memory box.
- Create poems or other artwork to help memorialize your loved one.
- Create a playlist or a soundtrack of memories you have of your loved one.
- Prepare and eat a special meal in honor of your loved one.
- Create a dance with music and gestures that express your memories and feelings about your loved one.



- Create a particular movement or gesture that represents a feeling or memory you have of your loved one and share that with your family or close friends.







- Carry something special that reminds you of your loved one that you can take out and hold when you feel the need. Share the significance of that item with others when appropriate.
- Light a candle at certain special times of the day or week to remind you of your loved one (for example, at dinnertime to represent sharing meals with him or her).
- Come up with a new tradition in your home or with your family that honors and memorializes your loved one.
- Create a (physical) memorial book for your loved one in which everyone has a page to share a memory of or a thought about the person who died.
- Journal your thoughts about the past, present and future to help you record and reflect on your life as it was, is and may be.

## **ONGOING CONNECTION & SUPPORT FROM FRIENDS & FAMILY**

- Share the story of your loved one's life and their death with those you trust.
- Set up a social media page where people can share stories about your loved one.
- Friends or family might bring traditional gifts of food and other items to your porch, or they could send virtual gifts online, to show their care and love.
- Think about some action or activity which can be done by multiple people all at the same time – the same minute of the same day, all together – even when all the people are in different places, across the city, across the country, or across the world. Knowing that your friends and family are all focusing on your loved one in the same moment can be a powerful way to connect with one another and experience their support.
  - One option would be for everyone to light a candle at this same special time and say the person's name.
  - Or you could play the same song, or ring a



bell at this time.

- You could watch a favorite movie or TV show together (in your different places), or cook the same meal together, or read the same poem, story or essay together.
- You might find video highlights, or whole games, and have a sports night watching the games.
- After the activity has been finished, the participants can connect in order to share about their experience and about the one who died.
- This could be a one-time thing, but it can also be something that's made into a ritual that you continue to do on an ongoing basis.
- A variation would be to share an activity across time, but in the same space. You can find a common place (in a park, at a street corner, near a place that was special to your loved one), where everyone can visit at different times, leaving messages or memorial items. Or taking a photo at that place to share with the group. This could also be done in similar places across different cities. In this way, everyone in the group can continue to see how their person continues to be honored and remembered over time.

If you have further questions or need more support, please contact the Highmark Caring Place staff. We are here for you.